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ABSTRACT

Perspectives on the undergraduate curriculum are offered at a faculty convocation by the President Emeritus of Ohio State University. Criticisms of the content and quality of college studies are noted. It is suggested that for the most part today's curriculum reflects the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s by emphasizing the individual's right to choose as well as variety and diversity. It avoids serious discussion of social issues and controversy, and the faculty has largely abdicated its responsibility for the design of the curriculum. Important educational goals are for graduates to understand the role of art and literature in illuminating the human condition, to have empathy for the poor, and to develop civic pride and responsibility. Currently colleges are reassessing and modifying their curricula and the government is asking higher education to define quality and measure college and student performance. The political pressure for student assessment results from discontent with today's college graduates. However, improved quality is attained in the private world of professors. While there is not all-purpose model curriculum, it is enough to toughen requirements, trim electives in the general education listing, and put together options that have rigor. (SW)

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THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM: WHO IS IN CHARGE?

An Address By

Harold L. Enarson, President Emeritus

The Ohio State University

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PREFACE

Dr. Harold Enarson served as president of The Ohio State University from 1972 to 1981, and Cleveland State University from 1966 to 1972. Earlier he served in administrative positions at the University of New Mexico. He continues to be a national leader in higher education and is much in demand as a speaker and consultant. His membership on the commission to study undergraduate education should give extra weight to his presentation.

Many universities, including our own, are giving serious consideration to what we may do to improve education for undergraduates. Harold Enarson's presentation provides an excellent basis for such considerations.

James D. McComas
President
The University of Toledo

THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM: WHO IS IN CHARGE?

I want to share with you some of my perplexities about the undergraduate curriculum. How I wish that I could draw upon a lifetime of study and reflection in order to think clearly about the important, current issue in higher education: the structure of the course of study — the curriculum. Alas, for most of my life the curriculum was something that was — well — "just there." As an entering freshman I was mystified by the college catalog, and finally learned that what mattered was the schedule of courses offered that semester at hours consistent with my work. And you had to have a major. As a graduate student, I experienced the next rush of awareness. Somewhere in the university were professors with fixed ideas about language requirements and education generally. Such stuff as majors and minors and distribution requirements were remote from my interests or concerns.

As an assistant professor (acting) at Stanford, I was no more aware of the workings of the Faculty Senate than I was of the Vatican — both bodies removed from both interest and responsibility. Much later, as a university president, I gazed with mingled awe and despair on a catalog offering an incredibly rich and varied intellectual fare — over 7,000 courses at Ohio State as I recall. One fine spring day, there being no demonstrations that afternoon, I asked to meet with the faculty committee reviewing the "basic educational requirements" and gave my considered views on what it meant to be an educated person. I thoroughly enjoyed myself — but was never invited back. The provost patiently explained that the curriculum was owned by the faculty.

In the mid-'70s Clark Kerr described the undergraduate curriculum as a "disaster area." No one listened or even noticed. It requires unusual determination to think seriously about the curriculum, about education. I am reminded of a comment by James Bryant Conant. He said:

> When someone writes or says that what we need today in the U.S. is to decide first what we mean by the word education, a sense of distasteful weariness overtakes me. I feel as if I were starting to see a badly scratched film of a poor movie for the second or third time.

Those of you who have braved service on curriculum committees will resonate to Dr. Conant's "sense of distasteful weariness."

It is intriguing to speculate on how educational reform movements ebb and tide in American life. Those of us in higher education applauded David Gardner's "The Nation at Risk" report with its sweeping indictment of the public schools. If there was a "rising tide of mediocrity," if we were losing our competitive edge in the world economy, if we were swamped with students unprepared for college level work, the blame lay squarely on the

public schools. And, well, maybe in part on that favorite target — the colleges of education.

We were slow to realize it, but the discontent with American education embraced higher education as well as the schools. The business community was the first to complain that many college graduates lacked even minimum qualifications required in the first job. Recently the nation's governors in a series of reports have demanded that colleges and universities require "minimum competencies," and some states enacted legislation to force the campuses to do just that. As if the great tasks of higher education are to be reduced to the securing of minimum competencies!

Within the academy the stage was set for fresh reform efforts. In the past several years we have witnessed at least a half dozen major national reports harshly critical of higher education. I participated in one such exercise: the drafting of the report of the Association of American Colleges, *Integrity in the College Curriculum*.

That report spoke of the lack of coherence and integrity in the college curriculum, of the "misguided marketplace philosophy which permits students as consumers to indulge virtually free choice among a smorgasbord of courses." "Faculty control over the curriculum," the report noted, "became lodged in departments that developed into adept protectors and advocates of their own interests, at the expense of institutional responsibility and curricular coherence." The basic college degree, we reported, has lost much of its meaning. Speaking directly to faculties everywhere, we were pointedly critical:

> Evidence of decline and devaluation is everywhere . . . Electives are being used to fatten majors and diminish breadth. It is as if no one cared . . . As for what passes as a curriculum, almost anything goes . . . The major in most colleges is little more than a gathering of courses taken in one department, lacking structure and depth.

We noted that the decline in the undergraduate degree had created

> . . . widespread contemporary skepticism about the quality of higher education . . . a public sense that standards are too low, that results are not what they used to be . . . . The inescapable conclusion: the college professors, whether they know it or not, have a job on their hands . . . . and they will need a great deal of help.

You may think the criticisms too harsh. I continue to believe they are on target. We are paying a high price for the experiments of the 1960s. We had glorified academic specialization and indulged student choice. The result has been a sprawling curriculum vandalized by internal academic politics and log rolling. Simply to read a sampling of student transcripts is to

appreciate how far we have gone in trivializing the college experience of many of our students.

I clip newspaper items that remind me of how little I really understand about life in the U.S. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, in an AP dispatch last November 4 reported on a survey of college students' beliefs.

> About a fourth of 1,000 college students polled in Texas, California, and Connecticut say they believe in the biblical account of creation. . . . About one-half believe that Adam and Eve were the first humans. . . . Between 20 and 40 per cent of those surveyed said they believed in various such theories, including extra-sensory perception, Big Foot, the lost city of Atlantis, and unidentified flying objects.

The anthropologist author of the study cautiously observed, "There may be something deficient in our science education." I take some comfort in believing that this poll, along with polls of faculty morale, reflect a cheerful delight in irritating the authorities.

Then I had a second thought — after all, they weren't graduates! College graduates wouldn't believe in Big Foot and unidentified flying objects. But then I came across the course offerings of the Denver Free University. The Denver Free University has some delectable offerings: Couples Massage, Do-it-yourself Acupuncture, Divine Meditation, and Self-hypnosis. The blurb for Course Number 939, Psychic Self-defense and Well Being, says, "Come to this class if you would like to know how to protect yourself from the huge amount of psychic debris that floats around you all the time." Do you recognize it? That's **your** in-basket! The class is offered by a college graduate with an M.B.A. and a D.D. Should you try Course Number 943, Reincarnation, Karma, and Transformation, you will find it is taught by the director of the Self-Actualization and Enlightenment Center, the possessor of a Bachelor of Social Work.

As Neils Bohr said, "There are some things that are so serious that you have to laugh at them."

The charge of incoherence is hardly new. It has been voiced by critics from within and without from the beginning of the Republic. But if we cannot agree on goals, how can we devise courses of study that contribute to those goals? Is college the "one place where liberal education can keep its heart whole" (Mark Van Doren) or "high school with ashtrays?" Is it a "sanctuary of truth, or is it a social service station . . . a culture mart" (Adelman)? Is college a training ground for the professions plus a warehousing arrangement to keep the young off the streets? Is college a place to find oneself — a training ground for coping in the bureaucratic world?

Perhaps college is all this and more. So where in all this is the Holy Grail of coherence and integrity?

But even if goals were reasonably clear and consistent, how would we reach agreement on methods. The inheritors of the Robert Hutchins faith would deal in universal truth, first principles, reading, writing, speaking, and mathematics. Daniel Bell argues that the subject matters are less important than methods of inquiry or ways of knowing. On the fundamental issue of whether the undergraduate curriculum should emphasize breadth or depth, Alfred North Whitehead counsels that "the spirit of generalization should dominate a university." Abraham Flexner counters that "specialization nas brought us to the point where we have reached and man's specialized intelligence will alone carry us along further." Thorstein Veblem says vocational training has no connection with higher learning. And Gerald Ford asks, "What good is training if it is not applied to jobs?" The debates go on and on, on every campus, for there may be no final answers — not in our pluralistic society.

But if there are no final answers, some answers are better then others. "A curriculum," says Clark Kerr, "is nothing less than the statement a college makes about what, out of the totality of man's constantly growing knowledge and experience, is considered useful, appropriate, or relevant to the lives of educated men and women at a certain point of time." Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, says that "a curriculum is the imposition of one generation's sense of crisis on the next generation." I would frame the issue differently. The curriculum, whether in the professional fields or in the arts and sciences, oscillates between past and present. It can be outdated, even reactionary. It can also succumb to trendiness in a society addicted to fads and fashions and the quick fix.

The current reform movement grows out of deep disquiet about the American future. It is disquiet that, perhaps unfairly, links the failures of society and of the economy to the failures of the campus. It is a reform movement without clear focus, as sprawling in criticism as the education sprawl it critiques. Ernest Boyer pronounces the undergraduate college, "the very heart of higher education," to be a "troubled institution" with conflicting priorities and competing interests that diminish the intellectual and social quality of the undergraduate experience and dramatically restrict the capacity of the colleges to serve its students." All tragically true.

It is possible for students to graduate from well-respected colleges and universities without even a beginning grasp of science, of life in another culture, of the rule of law, the workings of the American political system. At the very heart of the college experience, something is terribly lacking. It is education. We are concerned, as we should be, in having high quality professors teach in high quality style. We overlook the point that it is entirely possible to offer quality instruction in each and every course of

instruction and yet not offer quality education if the courses suffer from random selection. The roll-your-own curriculum produces bizarre combinations. See for yourself — sample some transcripts of graduating seniors.

Have you considered how much the comprehensive university patterns itself upon the shopping mall? Both are market oriented, offering a rich variety of offerings, some useful and others frivolous, to suit consumer tastes. Consumer preference determines whether academic courses and programs live or die. Shopping malls, it is true, have no "required" offerings and enjoy greater flexibility in fixing prices. As in the shopping mall, business units are largely independent and in vigorous competition with one another. In some universities the professional schools are in open defiance of any internal impulse toward development of university-wide core requirements. The office of the president, one supposes, is to be reduced to what some regard as its primary functions: Plumbing, parking, and public relations.

In these circumstances it has been a rearguard action to preserve earlier distribution requirements let alone to rethink the curriculum.

For the most part today's curriculum continues to reflect the legacy of the '60s and the '70s. It exalts the individual's right to choose. It prides itself on variety and diversity. It avoids like a plague any serious discussion of the social glue that it takes to keep together the society. It deals with social issues timorously, obliquely. It shuns controversy, sealing protest movements in their own self-centered enclaves: women's studies, ethnic studies. Some few departments become pockets of protest: at the other extreme some disciplines and departments are in full uncritical embrace of the business establishment. Is this what we want from our universities?

For the most part the faculty as a corporate body has abdicated its responsibility for the design of the curriculum. Individual professors may do a superb job in a classroom dedicated to quality performance. But they fail as academic citizens of the academic community if they do not take personal responsibility for continuing participation in the redesign of the courses of instruction.

You may not agree. You may feel that nothing much can be done, that our educational supermarkets are here to stay, and that "general eduation," like Humpty Dumpty, is broken beyond repair.

But I have discovered that there is a question that brings all our latent, critical instincts to the surface. It is: What do I want for my daughter, our grandson? Will he or she understand the role of art and literature in illuminating the human condition? Will he or she have a feel for any other culture, have empathy for the poor, develop civic pride and civic responsibility? The young are so very vulnerable, and cynicism is the great

temptress. But the professoriate fail their country and learning itself if they indulge an easy, fretful cynicism. Someone has said: We do not know enough to despair. It is a message that we need to communicate on campus.

The chemistry of social change is forever mysterious to me. Right now the prospects for significant reform seem good. It is a time for rediscovery and renewal. Edward Fiske, education writer for the *New York Times*, says that "interdisciplinary courses are now as prolific as laboratory mice." That could be a healthy sign. All around the nation colleges and universities are reassessing and modifying their curricula. There is a revival of interest in foreign languages and literature; a determined drive to inject women's perspectives in the sciences as well as history, the arts, literature. There is a new awareness of the importance of the Pacific rim and of better understanding those huge areas of the third world largely lost on our intellectual maps.

The political leadership of the nation is looking over our shoulders, impatient for results. And not just in the all-important arena of contributing to economic development efforts. Governors and legislators are asking that higher education define quality, that it put in place measures of institutional and student performance, that it document the "value-added" by a college education. The twin code words are assessment and accountability. It is said that without formal assessment there is no accountability.

There are serious limitations to conventional assessment, and it is essential to speak honestly about them. Assessment could likely become the Saturday night special of higher education — a tool that cannot be disassociated from its most likely use, that is, testing that relies heavily on quantitative measures. Observe how easy it is to slip from one unexamined premise to another. Accountability requires assessment, which in turn requires testing, which requires quantitative results. Obviously what cannot be assessed — that is, measured — is of less importance. As someone has observed, "If we cannot test what we teach, we teach what we can test." As Ken Ashworth, Texas Commissioner of Higher Education, has said, "The competencies of graduates of Fagin's School for Pickpockets would be easy to measure, but it would say nothing about the desirability of what is taught."

Let's face it. The political pressure for student assessment grows out of discontent with today's college graduates. But I never met a governor or a legislator who cared one whit about something called a curriculum. That is higher education's business, as indeed it is.

Improved quality is not to be attained by commands from on high. It is among the grassroots, in the private world of professors far from the public world of reformers, that real change develops. Administrators must provide encouragement, logistics, in the necessary reform of the under-

graduate curriculum. But only professors — here at The University of Toledo and everywhere — can do the job.

There is no all-purpose model curriculum, and no need to invent one. At the level of deans, departmental chairpersons, and curriculum committees it is enough to toughen requirements, to trim electives in the general education listing, and to put together options that have rigor. This much can be done, and in fact is beginning to be done. But we have to disenthrall ourselves of the notion that the reform of the curriculum consists simply of packaging and designing new combinations of courses — mixing here a bit of science, here a bit of art, there a bit of humanities.

General education that is defined as an integrated continuum of planned learning has been all but destroyed. In earlier times the curriculum was organized as a continuum of learning. In today's society of migratory learners, the student's involvement in the curriculum is discontinuous. Students of all ages and stages of learning are to be found in most of our classes.

Mass education has brought to class a wondrous mix of students from all classes, ethinc backgrounds, and income levels. Diversity is thy name. As George Keller has observed, "The idea of a return to the traditional liberal arts curriculums is as chimerical as the hope of a social return to tiny rural communities without alienation. . . . The real need is for fresh emphasis on liberal **teaching** in specialized courses."

In a sense virtually every professor has the key to academic reform within his or her hand. All that is required is creative imagination and commitment.

There is hardly a course that could not deal explicitly with the nature of evidence. What is a fact? How do we know what we know?

Writing, reading, speaking, listening: These are all art forms that can be cultivated in the classroom.

The management of numerical data: In a society bamboozled by numbers it ought to be required to teach about the deceptiveness of numbers. One thinks of public opinion polls on sex, faculty morale, and other matters of prurient interest. Did you realize that in Miami, Florida, the average person is born Cuban and dies Jewish?

Everything has a history, whether in music, art, woodworking, auto mechanics. The opportunities for sneaking up on students and nurturing historical consciousness are manifestly unlimited.

Science education has been described as "deficient in purpose, scope,

and style of teaching." If the conventional divisions of science serve as barriers to the emerging knowledge base (as some argue), then the best minds in science need to rework the instructional modes. At minimum, students need to grasp science for what it is, intellectual adventure of a high order.

Values — the capacity for informed moral choice — can be cultivated everywhere. Students need to be confronted with the burdens of choice, with what Sartre meant by the phrase "condemned to freedom."

The language of art, music, drama, dance offer unlimited possibility, and is largely to be found in courses so described. Their richness is best gained by direct access. And that is true of language and literature and foreign cultures. They are best absorbed by direct immersion in an alien culture. Not necessarily a trip to France. In big-city America we have the treasures of alien cultures only miles away, but light years away in our understanding.

In short, every day in every way there are opportunities for professors to be unabashed role models, to testify by their actions for truth and courage, to curb the easy infection of cynicism.

The deepening fragmentation in our society reinforces the fragmentation within the colleges and the universities. We look in vain for the social glue that holds us together, that makes us more than lonely members of a lonely crowd. We must renew our confidence in the magic of human personality, for ourselves as faculty members and administrators as well as for our students.

Who is in charge? You — the faculty — as individuals and as a corporate body. The university, the state, and the students look to you for leadership — more than you would ever guess.